

First Unitarian Church

September 20, 2015

“Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy. And yet being alive is no answer to the problems of living. To be or not to be is not the question. The vital question is: how to be and how not to be?”

Those are the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

“Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy. And yet being alive is no answer to the problems of living. To be or not to be is not the question. The vital question is: how to be and how not to be?”

How to be and how not to be. That is a very spiritual question.

In Kenya a few weeks ago, at the worship service I attended in the neighborhood called Kayole, the preacher preached from the biblical story of the Good Samaritan.

You know how it goes. A man is traveling along the road to *Jericho* when he is stripped of his clothes and beaten by *robbers/thieves*. And who comes along? *A priest*. But rather than stopping, the priest walks on by. And then along comes a *Levite*. And he basically pretends not to see the man, too. Finally, who arrives? *A Samaritan*— someone who would not have been expected to help—and the Samaritan helps. He binds up the wounds, gives the man a ride on his donkey, and even pays for a night at the inn so that the injured man can rest in safety.

“Who passed a person who was beaten by thieves and left by the side of the road on their way?” the preacher asked the congregation. Well the Kayole congregation is located in the heart of a huge Nairobi slum. His question surprised me. Who passed a person who was beaten by thieves and left by the side of the road on their way? We just passed miles of people like that, I thought. Every person in every slummy building and shack was beaten by thieves. And most of the people in that congregation were from there. They too were very poor. They were beaten by the thieves of colonialism and corruption and capitalism without any moral bearings. But the preacher said, “Let us remember that there are people worse off than we are.” And “Can you serve God without serving other people? We are made in the image of God. Praise God.”

“Amen,” the people replied.

North of Kenya, across the Red Sea, other people—surely the kind of worse-off-people that the preacher imagined—are trying to flee the imminent threat of

violence and death in Syria. We have watched in the news as those people, those families with grandmothers and children who want only to be able to live, have been turned away from the shores of safer countries. And we wonder, what can be done? What can be done about this, and about the other things happening around the world? And even in our own neighborhood? What can be done about climate change?

... And so the question is how should we be? In this context, and knowing that all anyone is guaranteed is this one life, how shall we be?

In our reading this morning, John Buehrens, one of my teachers and the former president of our denomination, reflects on his relationship as a minister to the people of his congregation, by telling us the story of his visit to Joan in the hospital. At her life's end, she is holding his feet to the fire about climate change.

She has all the facts, but she hasn't been so successful in what is possibly the hardest work... inspiring others to respond. That she leaves to John and to those closest to her.

The story illustrates the awkward side of this thing that is dear to us. Not many people would be happy belonging to a church that is disconnected from the world around it, where we talk about ideas that float around up here in the sky and are not relevant to our lives.

And not many people want to belong to a church where we talk about what it really is like to be alive in this world but we are... all talk. Right? A church where good things are preached and affirmed, but where people walk out the door with nothing more to offer the world than when they came in, and where their behavior reveals a fundamental indifference to the world. Why bother, right?

Or worse yet would be a church where people get together to complain about things... but never *respond* to them.

Do you know anyone like that? Anyone who complains about the state of our city or country or world, but they don't get involved and maybe they don't even bother to vote? Because they think it won't do any good. They've let themselves off the hook by thinking that...now they don't have to figure out what to do... but being off the hook has not made them happy either. You can tell because they are still complaining.

On the flipside are those who believe you can never, ever do too much, and those who try to heed that advice.

In Africa, another minister told me of a Unitarian Universalist woman who also visited there and was instantly moved to do as much as possible to help. A noble

response. But the need in Nairobi alone is staggering. One leader in a congregation there described it as being “like a river,” a river of need that just flows and flows.

In her effort to give as much as she could, the woman gave everything...even selling her house and donating the proceeds... and ended up without a place to live or enough money to get by comfortably herself. Looking at what a relatively small difference her enormous sacrifice had made, she became sad and then bitter. It sounds like a parable, right? It could be one!

It is like a parable about the question, how should we be? And it is an illustration of an anxiety many of us experience when we witness the scale of need and suffering in the world: the fear that if we get too close to it, if we look at it too squarely in the eye, we will discover that the only moral response is to lose our own lives to it.

Religion has come up with various ways of handling these things. Here in the US we are most familiar with a couple from the Christian tradition. One is characteristic of conservative or fundamentalist Christianity: belief in an all powerful, all knowing God, who has ultimate control over the world, and who will reconcile everything in the afterlife. In that theology, we just have to hang on until we get to heaven. Or hell. But one way or another, this life is temporary.

Another way is characteristic of liberal or progressive Christianity: according to that tradition, the kingdom of God will be realized not in some otherworldly realm, but right here on this earth. And we are the hands and feet of God. So it's up to us to build it.

The Unitarian Universalist church grew out of the liberal Christian tradition, and you can see this theology of justice still very much present in our churches. One of our most popular hymns is “We'll Build a Land.” We'll build a land where we bind up the broken... we'll build a land where the captives go free...

It's a good hymn, a beautiful one. But there is a hidden danger in it: when we focus exclusively on some better world, we end up neglecting this one. And because the better world is so urgently needed, in this theology there is high value on sacrificing the present to get there. But this future world, where peace prevails and justice rolls down... people have been working toward it for generations. It is not right around the corner.

In that way, ironically, the conservative and the progressive Christian approaches are similar. Both set their sights on a future, more perfect world. The Unitarian Universalist historian Dan McKanan points out that we religious liberals are allergic to talking about heaven, but somehow we are still doing it—we are still oriented toward a future, more perfect place.

In its extreme fundamentalist Christian version, this plays out when people ignore climate change and war –or worse, encourage those things—because they see them as signs of end times.

In liberal religion, it looks like ignoring important things now. Not tending our spiritual lives. Not taking care of our bodies. Not tending our relationships. I know what I'm talking about because ministers are especially prone to these things!

Clergy are notorious for not taking care of themselves and their personal relationships. As a group, they have higher than normal rates of obesity, depression, heart problems, high blood pressure, diabetes, and stress.ⁱ When ministers quit the ministry, they often cite these factors and burnout as reasons. I'm not going to do that to you—or to myself. (Please remember that if it is *your* cause or meeting I must decline to attend). Instead, I'm going to try my best to model spiritual wellness, devotion, hope, and joy.

When we focus exclusively on working as hard as possible for an ideal tomorrow, not only do we find our present lives neglected, we also get tired. We've all met burned out people. And let's face it: most of us get tired just thinking about it. Do you know what I mean?

But we don't have to choose between losing ourselves in the effort to build a better world, or turning our backs on it. There's another way. And our UU faith equips us spiritually for it.

In their book, *A House For Hope*, John Buehrens and the UU theologian Rebecca Parker use the metaphor of a house to describe our faith.

All around the house is a garden- the earth itself. This is the context for all that we do. It is a place of beauty. Parker points out that the bible begins and ends with a garden. It opens with the Garden of Eden, paradise. And it closes with the book of revelations—a wild and wooly book!—that portrays a verdant city at the end of times. In this way, symbolically, beauty is not the only reality, but is the ultimate context for all that unfolds in the drama of humankind.

Our house—our faith—has walls. These are the things that holds us together. They are our shared human response to grace, interdependence, and responsibility.

It has a roof—a shelter for people and communities in need of healing or strength. For ourselves, and for all those we encounter for whom we are called to care.

And then there are the foundations. One foundation in the house of our faith is the belief that life is a sacred gift.

And then there are the welcoming rooms within the house.

(They don't mention any bathrooms in their theology. Or closets. Or those parts of the house that attract piles of clutter. Is that a metaphor for anything in your spiritual life? Yeah, me too. Another sermon.)

This house that is our tradition, is a house where we live in the present. It is not something we will build tomorrow. We are already in it now.

In the present, we are whole people. We are invited to tune into our emotional and sensual capacities, to live in our bodies and take care of them. To experience life's fullness- including its beauty, grace, pleasure, and love. And those things do not belong just to privileged people. They are essential to life. They are essential to the will to live. This is important for you to hear because no matter who you are, no matter where you live or how lucky you have been so far, not one of us is immune to despair and misfortune.

When despair and misfortune happen to us, then grace, beauty, love—these things strike a chord with our souls and help us pull through. On my way to Africa, I spent a couple of days in Amsterdam, where I visited the Anne Frank house. Two years she lived in that little apartment with heavy curtains drawn, and never went out, while Nazis devastated her world with seemingly unstoppable brutality and threatened to come for her at any moment. And what was on her bedroom walls? Movie stars. They are still there, magazine cut outs she pasted over the wallpaper. And what was in her journal? Profound beauty, love, and grace. We are made for joy as well as compassion.

Likewise, in Kayole the people dance and sing spirited hymns and dress to the nines. Secondhand clothing is everywhere in Kenya. It spills out of stands along the roadways, and it isn't unusual at all to see a woman selling something at another one of those roadside stands, decked out in a ball gown. Young children are also dressed in a way that suggests the sheer pleasure of it: in one group of kids you'll see everything from flip flops and shorts to a sparkling prom dress and tiara.

Parker says that although the bible portrays Adam and Eve as being cast out of the Garden of Eden, maybe the truth is that we ourselves have turned our backs on it with our theologies of future better worlds. "We are treating life here and now as though it were a barren wasteland," she says, "but we have profoundly misjudged our location."

Cynicism does the same thing, but without the sense of urgency or any hope. Cynicism is another way of not showing up in the present. It masquerades as "being realistic." In reality, it turns part of us off to the present. The part that would be responsive.

Being in the present, we aren't working endlessly toward something that we will never see accomplished. It's a responsive hope—a hope for this world now. It connects us deeply with it. Instead of demanding that we fix everything instantly, we

are called to show up to this reality now. To be present to it. This means we are meant to experience all of it. A sense of urgency is needed sometimes—absolutely—but we are not allowed to give ourselves over to despair. If life is sacred, then for the most part we are not encouraged to annihilate ourselves in search of something better.

Here I want to acknowledge that sometimes self-sacrifice is correct. Sometimes when one life is sacrificed, a great number of others are saved and even more people are inspired to help.

I'm thinking not only of heroes like Martin Luther King Jr and Gandhi, but also of, for example, the troops gave their lives that Anne Frank's father could be freed from the concentration camp.

But we cannot go about living as though we were in a state of war all the time. It is not a sustainable way to be, it does not do justice to the sacredness of life, and so it is not a spiritually wise way to be in the long run.

The answer to the question of how to be is *present*.

In the present, we are not to give our lives away easily or neglect them. Instead we, and everyone, must simply discern what we can manage to do now, with our next step. In Kayole it's selling one more thing or service to earn their daily bread, and hoping there is enough left over to invest for bigger returns.

For the people in Syria, it's boarding a boat to an uncertain destination, or taking a step into a dark night.

For us, it's noticing where our passion meets the world's deep need, and deciding what we can do with that. Will you show up as a builder for a day at Habitat for Humanity? Tutor a child? Serve soup? Will you clean up the natural spaces we share? Or contribute to the fund that pays children's school fees in Kenya? Will you make a financial pledge for the first time to your church? Will you attend an interfaith meeting, where friendships are created in the process of responding to this world, right now?

Living in the present, we do what we can. We experience both beauty and discomfort. We engage the deep spiritual practice of being where we are, in the unfinished yet always unfolding present.

We experience the pain of our limits in the face of need in other areas of our lives, too. Recently I met with a young leader in town, a woman who is at the head of an organization that serves at risk youth. She is a leader with vision, and yet as she described the dynamics of her job, it became clear that at the same time she is trying to work toward the vision, she has to deal with an overwhelming load of demands and tasks she to keep the organization going.

Maybe in your work, whatever kind of work it is, paid or unpaid, you are also familiar with the feeling that things could be a lot better, but you are too busy to fix them. Or maybe you aren't a leader, but you see something the leaders cannot, and you feel helpless to fix it.

Or, in our personal lives, we may find ourselves or our relationships are like an unrealized vision, a work in progress. Maybe you have a much more vague notion of a time in the future when you'll be satisfied... a dream that maybe you have not even quite articulated to yourself. It's hard to know if it's realistic if you haven't put your finger on what it is. It nags at you, but you don't have much sense of progress. Only a sense of discontent with what is.

The practice of being present, of noticing and nurturing what is life affirming and beautiful right where we are, as we take our next steps is a spiritual practice that serves us in all areas of our lives.

How shall we be? Present. Attentive. Joyful. Hopeful. Responsive. Together.

ⁱ (Christian century <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-10/fit-ministry>)